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SUBJECT: SAG'S FOREIGN POLICY: TRADING PRINCIPLES FOR POWER?

Summary

¶1. In a March 25 forum assessing South Africa's foreign policy from the standpoint of global human rights, prominent political commentator Professor Adam Habib acknowledged that the SAG's stances in multilateral fora often disappointed local and international rights advocates. The underlying cause, he asserted, was the ANC's overriding concern for promoting a more equitable balance of world power -- to the point of a willingness to trade off real-time human rights concerns (e.g. in Myanmar, Sudan, or Zimbabwe) for structural reform in global institutions like the U.N. Habib characterized the SAG's agenda as a 'realist' strategy, of the developing South taking on the developed North for a greater share of power even ahead of rights, a strategy that was misunderstood by the rights community and admittedly often ineffective. A visiting officer from Human Rights Watch ruefully described South African foreign policy as "naive, self-defeating, and ultimately unhelpful to victims." End Summary.

Context: SA's Controversial Stances

¶2. On March 25, the South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA) held a forum questioning the country's fidelity to global humanrights in its formulation of foreign policy. Entitled "South Africa's Foreign Engagement: Whither Human Rights?" the program hosted speakers who critiqued South Africa's key votes in the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) 2006-8 such as on Myanmar and Iran, former President Mbeki's long-running mediation of the political crisis in Zimbabwe, and other positions taken within the African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC), such as nuanced defense of Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir and the call for sanctions against the new regime in Madagascar. As if calculated to reinforce the theme, on the day of the event the SAG was facing real-time howls of protest in the press against its denial of a visa to the Dalai Lama, allegedly under Chinese pressure.

Great Expectations, Not Met

¶3. Prominent policy analyst Professor Adam Habib led off the forum by citing the world's high hopes, later dashed, for the newly democratic South Africa as a vigorous voice of conscience. For the human rights community, the SAG's seat

on the UNSC was "the ultimate culmination of the liberation struggle." There was anticipation that South Africa would be "the great advocate." Two years later, however, rights NGOs feel betrayed, after the SAG has consistently "sided with autocrats." (From the audience, the Danish Ambassador echoed this disappointment, saying Nordic nations were surprised not to see the SAG act as a middle power, bridging North and South. "We wanted to build alliances with South Africa, but the preference was for G-77, at any cost, always.") Some commentators, noted Habib, believe the SAG is driven by appeasement of Russia and China, past allies in its fight for freedom. The SAG counters that it acts to oppose manipulation of multilateral fora by the Western powers. Habib proceeded to explore that claim as pivotal to explaining the SAG's policymaking, which has so frustrated the human rights community.

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Power Re-balancing Trumps Rights Concerns

¶4. Habib explained that while human rights are a core element of SAG policy, they compete with a stronger impulse to redress structural imbalances of power between developing countries and the G-8. To grasp the SAG's agenda, stressed Habib, rights advocates must (but seldom do) understand the historically-rooted motivations of the ruling ANC party. While the ANC is indeed aligned with the pro-rights, anti-colonialist thrust of the first generation of liberation leaders, it "has also observed the unraveling of nationalist

PRETORIA 00000631 002 OF 003

experiments in Africa -- due to the machinations of the big powers," creating an overriding focus on global power dynamics. In Habib's view, Mbeki attempted to balance the two impulses in a form of 'principled pragmatism,' neither kow-towing nor openly antagonizing the West but seeking a middle road of reform through engagement. "The goal is a more equal world order -- but subverted from within," said Habib. Such a "realist" strategy, of the developing South taking on the developed North for power even more than for rights, is one that inevitably fuels resentment among rights advocates.

SAG: Pro-Africa, Pro-South; UN "Brinkmanship"

¶5. Habib outlined how the ANC's 'realist' drive to level the world's playing field manifests itself in initiatives on multiple levels -- within Africa, in developing countries' fora, and on the broad U.N. stage. Stabilization of Africa through conflict mediation and military peace-keeping was high on Mbeki's agenda, along with regional governance architectures (e.g. AU, NEPAD, SADC, etc.) and investment incentives, all "to put Africa on the map" of world institutions. At the next tier, the SAG is a strong proponent of "South-South collaboration" such as via the non-aligned movement (NAM), in the area of nuclear nonproliferation, and on issues like Iran and Palestine. South Africa conceived the India-Brazil-South-Africa (IBSA) bloc that served as a kernel of the G-20, which in turn marshalled the collective strength of smaller nations to bring world trade talks to a standstill. Finally, at the global multilateral level, the SAG pursues a "brinkmanship" strategy in the U.N., targeting causes which are dear to the big powers and obstructively using those as wedges to accrue bargaining power for the South.

SA Agenda: Explicable, but Often Counterproductive

¶6. In response to audience attacks on SAG policy as reprehensible and "inexplicable," Habib was at pains to

emphasize that he was explaining the ANC's approach but not defending it wholly. The Dalai Lama refusal was "outrageous, and of course, stupid -- and it created exactly the kind of controversy the government wanted to avoid." The SAG's 'no' vote on Myanmar sanctions was ostensibly an objection to the resolution's being tabled in the UNSC, an arena the SAG feels is prone to manipulation by the lead powers -- but instead of only blocking it, South Africa could have led the charge to introduce the measure in the U.N. Human Rights Council. In effect, the SAG "was wrong to trade Burmese civil liberties for the sake of systemic reform." Brinkmanship to rebalance power had worked to constructive effect in trade talks, however, and with respect to Al Bashir it was defensible: "Is Bashir a thug? Yes! But do we temper justice to advance peace? Yes! South Africa is perhaps the prime example of that."

Power vs. Rights -- an "Artificial Divide"

¶7. Summing up, Habib said he was equally critical of the SAG's policies and the human rights community's "simplistic" advocacy, which between them had created an artificial divide Qadvocacy, which between them had created an artificial divide between nationalism and liberalism, or between structural issues of global power and fundamental civil liberties. "The human rights community ignores the systemic angle... (It) doesn't understand equity or power. We need an equal playing field through U.N. reforms and resources." The ICC was important, indeed, to encourage accountability over and above the mechanisms of the nation state, but it was even more crucial that justice apply equally to all. Bashir must be brought before the ICC, said Habib, but only if George W. Bush and Condaleeza Rice were included as well.

HRW: SAG Policy is Naive and Unhelpful

¶8. Human Rights Watch (HRW) officer Jon Philip countered Habib's presentation with the consensus view of rights NGOs,

PRETORIA 00000631 003 OF 003

that SAG policy was misguided in intent and harmful in its effect of projecting mixed messages. "We see naivete in South Africa's foreign policy," he said, "in this notion that by reforming international institutions they will somehow advance the human cause." Systemic reform was a long-term goal, and a hopeful ideal, whereas human rights abuses were occurring real-time to real people. The SAG was laden with baggage from its apartheid past, when it should be more progressive and forward-looking. SAG policymakers were unduly suspicious of rights groups, "as if we were somehow co-sponsors of the abuses of the West." Soft on Sudan and Zimbabwe, but tough on Madagascar, the AU risked looking hypocritical and biased in the world's eyes. In sum, to HRW, South Africa's approach to foreign policy was "naive, self-defeating, and ultimately unhelpful to victims."

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